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ABSTRACT

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 is designed to provide all young people, including out-of-school and at-risk youth, with access to programs that integrate academic and occupational education. In many cases, however, these youth are reached only by dropout prevention efforts. Because dropouts, as well as young people who have obtained low-skill jobs after high school graduation, need the opportunities that school-to-work provides, recent initiatives have taken a variety of forms to address the needs of out-of-school youth. Strategies that have been employed include the following: (1) demonstrating the benefits of school-to-work programs; (2) integrated learning; (3) nonmandatory enrollment; (4) youth as active participants; (5) distinct program identity; (6) short-term benchmarks; (7) high expectations; (8) support services; (9) adult mentors; and (10) employer incentive mechanisms. The Milwaukee Public School System's Division of Alternative Programs serves a wide range of at-risk and out-of school youth. Central to this system's success in school-to-work programs for these youth has been its ability to engage all stakeholders to meet all partners' needs. (This report describes 11 organizations that can provide information about school-to-work for out-of-school youth.) (KC)

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SCHOOL TO WORK OPPORTUNITIES

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★RESOURCE BULLETIN

FEBRUARY 1996

School-to-Work Opportunities For Out-of-School Youth

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 is designed to provide *all* young people, including out-of-school and at-risk youth, with access to programs that integrate academic and occupational education, set high standards, and prepare them for the workforce. Many school-to-work programs, however, primarily serve in-school youth, while programs that do serve at-risk and out-of-school youth have been directed more toward prevention than reintegration with the existing system.

The viewpoint that argues simply for "dropout prevention" fails to recognize that youth often leave school for reasons that overwhelm the effectiveness of a prevention program--such as poor academic achievement, discipline problems, substance abuse, pregnancy, and other family responsibilities. These youth--left to face the demands of work and life on their own, with minimal academic, occupational, or social supports--are often not able to achieve their full potential. They need "second-chance" programs as well as prevention efforts.

Out-of-school youth may need the opportunities that school-to-work provides even more than in-school youth. High school dropouts, as well as young people who have drifted into poor jobs after high school, generally do not develop the same skills and competencies as in-school youth. Recent initiatives to address the needs of out-of-school youth have taken a variety of forms, from in-school programs to out-of-school programs operating in conjunction with school systems.

This bulletin summarizes a number of strategies that have been employed across a variety of geographic areas and occupations by programs serving out-of-school youth. It closes with a selected listing of organizations which provide information and guidance to practitioners designing or operating school-to-work systems that serve out-of-school youth.

Strategies

Demonstrate Benefits. Communities often hesitate to invest in initiatives for out-of-school youth, including community stakeholders in education and training systems--local practitioners, program developers and administrators, policy makers, community groups, local businesses, schools, parents and guardians, and the students themselves. People developing initiatives for out-of-school youth should recognize that they may have to convince each set of stakeholders of the value of these initiatives. They need to persuade young people that additional education will benefit them at work and throughout life. They need to demonstrate to schools that these young people can succeed if offered another chance. They need to

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convince policy makers, local businesses, and the community that their investments will prepare a stronger workforce and promote economic development. And they need to prepare the school system to work with alternative programs serving out-of-school youth.

Involving all stakeholders in developing school-to-work systems and goals fosters their long-term participation. This strategy also helps ensure that the system's components are coordinated and duplication of service prevented. It also reinforces to all stakeholders the importance of their roles in the school-to-work system and ensures that their individual needs are considered.

Integrated Learning. Because of their skepticism about the education system, out-of-school youth must continually be shown how what is learned in the classroom relates to the workplace and to their future. This requires the coordination and cooperation of direct service providers, such as teachers and workplace supervisors. For example, members of industry have worked directly with teachers to ensure that coursework is directly applied to workplace experiences. Other programs incorporate a service-learning component to demonstrate the relevance of school and work to community development.

Non-Mandatory Enrollment. Youth who drop out of school are typically not motivated to continue their education. Program developers have used outreach programs to stress the benefits of additional education and training by highlighting the successes of previous participants. Mandating participation, however, often increases the cynicism of out-of-school youth, creating an environment that is not conducive to learning and negatively influencing other, more willing participants.

Youth As Active Participants. Young people who leave school or do not continue their education after high school often do so out of boredom or frustration with the school system. Programs for out-of-school youth have overcome this problem by working with youth to identify their strengths and career interests, ensuring that courses and work placements reflect these interests. This approach allows youth a role in program and curriculum development and provides them with a sense of control over their education and, as a result, their future.

Distinct Program Identity. Youth often drop out because school seems to them to be disconnected from "real life" and the world of work. Program developers must therefore ensure that the skills acquired outside of work relate not only to the workplace but also to a youth's interests. Many have designed programs around distinct occupational and workplace experiences, a basic characteristic of school-to-work. For example, young people working in the health care industry may undertake related projects outside of work, such as studying anatomy or preparing papers on the history of health care. This strategy helps students more easily identify the relevance of education to their careers and their future.

Short-Term Benchmarks. Successful school-to-work programs for out-of-school youth focus on long-term goals, but use short-term assessments to measure their progress. They typically look at benchmarks that measure changes in attitudes towards school and work, skills utilized at work, and academic achievement. Benchmarks must further address whether youth become more motivated to continue their education, and whether or not a program's goals match participant needs. Regular assessment allows service providers to redirect attention if program goals are not being met, or if youth are not satisfied with the results of participation.

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High Expectations. Out-of-school youth are often viewed as "less able" than their in-school peers because of their histories of poor performance in the classroom. Their lower academic achievement levels, however, are often tied to diminished expectations for these youth, not to lack of ability. Teachers and workplace supervisors who demand high levels of performance often get what they ask for. To succeed, out-of-school youth may require additional support services, but program developers should recognize that these youth have just as much potential to achieve as do their in-school peers.

Support Services. The lack of necessary support services, such as child care, transportation, and substance abuse counseling, is often one reason that youth drop out of school. Programs that successfully bring out-of-school youth back into the education system and keep them there ensure that the appropriate services are provided.

Adult Mentors. Frequently, out-of-school youth do not have role models who inspire them either to stay in school or succeed in the workplace. Many programs provide a caring adult mentor--perhaps someone who has experienced similar problems--for each participant. These mentors, who typically become involved in all aspects of a youth's participation in a school-to-work system, have helped provide many young people with the advice and encouragement required to succeed.

Employer Incentive Mechanisms. School-to-work initiatives must ensure that the business community is recognized as an equal partner in preparing youth for the workforce. Engaging employers in programs for out-of-school youth may be difficult because businesses often fear that these youth lack the skills and commitment required for success. Employers must therefore be convinced that participation will benefit their organization. Examples of incentive mechanisms used to encourage initial participation include training to address an industry's future workforce needs and creating roles for business in participant selection and program development. Although these incentive mechanisms are designed to engage employers initially, it is typically the performance of youth themselves that fosters continued participation.

Effective Practices

The Milwaukee Public School System's Division of Alternative Programs serves a wide range of at-risk and out-of-school youth. Its alternative schools are designed to support middle- and high school-aged youth who have dropped out of school, are behind their peers academically, have high rates of absenteeism, or fit a variety of other at-risk characteristics. The public school system operates the thirty-one alternative schools, each of which contains a school-to-work component.

These schools act as "learning communities," with small class sizes and a specific occupational, occupational, and/or cultural identity. For example, one school offers bilingual classes to assist Hispanic youth in adapting to the demands of the workplace. Another school is designed to address the needs of pregnant women and young mothers, providing extensive social supports not present in the regular educational system and giving these young women the ability to return to or stay in school.

Milwaukee's alternative schools are based on the needs of the students. Curricula in many schools are designed to incorporate the interests and goals of each student. These curricula are reinforced by substantive work experiences that allow youth to apply skills used in the classroom. Several schools offer half-day academic programs that provide classroom instruction in the morning and schedule work-based

learning experiences in the afternoon. This approach demonstrates to students how school relates to work, fostering improved academic achievement and workplace performance.

Central to Milwaukee's success has been its ability to engage all stakeholders actively--the schools, parents/guardians, businesses, the community, and the students themselves--to ensure that programming is coordinated and geared towards the needs of these partners. Local businesses and community organizations have been actively involved in program development and implementation. For example, one school has a business partnership with the Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company. As part of the partnership, students from the school receive tutoring help from employees of the insurance company. These types of partnerships have reinforced the Milwaukee Public School System's commitment to providing comprehensive school- and work-based learning experiences for at-risk and out-of-school youth.

For further information, contact the Milwaukee Public School System, Alternative Program Information Center, 609 North 8th Street, Milwaukee, WI 53233-2445 ★ 414-276-0599.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOPIC, CONSULT THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS:

The Alternative Schools Network (ASN) supports community-based and community-run programs that develop and expand educational, training, and support services for youth--particularly for youth in inner-city neighborhoods. Much of ASN's work has involved assisting in the development of programs for out-of-school youth or those at risk of dropping out. 1807 West Sunnyside, Suite 1D, Chicago, IL 60640 ★ 312-728-4030.

Arizona CALL-A-TEEN Youth Resources, Inc. is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the long-term economic self-sufficiency of at-risk and out-of-school youth. CALL-A-TEEN provides education and training experiences designed to foster improved competencies among its participants. In September 1995, CALL-A-TEEN opened its **Center of Excellence**, a public charter school that emphasizes basic skills, integrated academic and occupational experiences, and the practical application of skills within the context of school-to-work. More than thirty percent of all students in the Center are former dropouts. 649 North Sixth Avenue, Phoenix, AZ ★ 602-252-6721.

Bay State Skills Corporation (BSSC) develops school-to-work programs and provides technical assistance on education and training initiatives across Massachusetts and the New England region. BSSC has launched statewide education reform efforts designed to promote collaboration among schools, colleges, employers, and community-based organizations, including programs and services that address the unique needs of out-of-school and at-risk youth. In addition, BSSC has issued reports and made policy recommendations on school-to-work for at-risk and out-of-school youth. 101 Summer Street, Boston, MA 02110-1203 ★ 617-292-5100.

The Center for Employment and Training (CET) is a private, non-profit corporation dedicated to job training and career development. Focusing mainly on those who are hardest to serve, CET operates its own intake, training, skills building, and counseling programs. Nearly twenty percent of CET participants are aged seventeen to twenty-one, and fifty-four percent of CET enrollees of all ages are elementary or high school dropouts. 701 Vine Street, San Jose, CA 95110 ★ 408-287-7924.

The National Association of Service and Conservation Corps (NASCC) is the membership organization for youth corps programs. Since its founding in 1985, NASCC has served as an advocate, central reference point, and source of assistance for the growing number of state and local youth corps around the country.

666 11th Street NW, Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20001-4542 ★ 202-737-6272 ★ Fax: 202-737-6277 ★ Email: nascc@nascc.org.

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) works with teachers, counselors, administrators, businesses, and community leaders concerned with dropout issues. NDPC provides technical assistance to programs operating dropout prevention programs; conducts research on a variety of dropout and dropout-related issues; and collects, analyzes, and disseminates information on dropout prevention strategies. NDPC also operates a database listing programs and other resources applicable to at-risk youth. Many of their services and resources are directed at out-of-school as well as in-school at-risk youth. 205 Martin Street, Clemson, SC 29634-5111 ★ 803-656-2599.

The National Youth Employment Coalition is a network of over 80 youth employment/development organizations dedicated to promoting policies and programs that help youth succeed in becoming lifelong learners, productive workers, and self-sufficient citizens. 1001 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 728, Washington, DC 20036 ★ 202-659-1064 ★ Fax: 202-775-9733.

New Ways to Work is a non-profit organization dedicated to identifying innovative workplace practices, such as the integration of school-based and work-based learning. Its **New Ways Workers** program collaborates with schools and community-based organizations to ensure that the needs of both in-school and out-of-school youth are met. It also incorporates businesses into the development process in order to identify employer demands more effectively and foster more receptive workplace environments. 785 Market Street, Suite 950, San Francisco, CA 94103 ★ 415-995-9860.

The Young Adult Learning Academy (YALA) is a school dedicated to youth who have dropped out of the New York City schools or completed high school with very low academic achievement levels. In order to help young people complete their high school education and enter employment, YALA provides an integrated program of education, occupational preparation (child care, health, computers), and support services which include family support, health services, and programs in the arts and culture. YALA works closely with New York City community organizations to recruit youth and provide support services. 320 East 96th Street, New York, NY 10128 ★ 212-348-7006.

YouthBuild USA is a comprehensive youth and community development program that provides unemployed high school dropouts with the opportunity to serve their communities as they develop job skills and prepare for their future. Participants build housing for the homeless and other low-income persons while attending a YouthBuild-operated school to earn a high-school equivalency degree and perhaps prepare to continue into postsecondary education. Programming includes intensive group counseling and peer support networks. YouthBuild USA also provides technical assistance to local organizations either operating or planning to implement a YouthBuild program. 58 Day Street, Third Floor, West Somerville, MA 02144 ★ 617-623-9900.

For additional information, please contact:
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